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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Pakistan's Strategic Calculus: Navigating the Iran-Saudi Rivalry****Dr. Muhammad Naveed Ul Hasan Shah**

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Abstract

This research article investigates Pakistan's intricate foreign policy calculus in balancing its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia amidst their protracted rivalry. The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing upon an extensive review of scholarly literature and policy analyses to understand the historical evolution of the Iran-Saudi conflict, the multifaceted dimensions of Pakistan's bilateral ties with each nation, and the resultant domestic and regional implications. The findings reveal that Pakistan's foreign policy is characterized by a pragmatic "neutrality-cum-balancing" strategy, a strategic imperative driven by geopolitical compulsions, economic dependencies, and internal sectarian vulnerabilities. While this adaptive approach has enabled Pakistan to maintain crucial bilateral ties and contribute to regional de-escalation efforts, it faces escalating challenges from external ideological influences and the complexities of global power dynamics. The article concludes that sustaining this delicate equilibrium necessitates a continuous recalibration of Pakistan's diplomatic and economic strategies to safeguard its national interests and foster regional stability.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy, Iran-Saudi Rivalry, Regional Stability, Sectarian Dynamics, Strategic Balancing Middle East Geopolitics.

Introduction

Pakistan occupies a uniquely strategic geographical position, serving as a critical nexus between the Middle East and South Asia (Khan, 1967). This location places it at the crossroads of major maritime and land transit routes, effectively bridging the Arabian Sea with the energy-rich regions of Central Asia (Shahid, 2020). To its west, Pakistan shares a significant 900-kilometer-long border with Iran (Anwar, 2020), underscoring a direct neighborhood imperative that necessitates careful diplomatic engagement. Concurrently, Pakistan's historical, cultural, and ideological ties with Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, are profoundly deep-rooted and have shaped a "special relationship" between the two nations (Anwar et al., 2025; Afzal, 2019). These dual relationships, characterized by both proximity and profound historical connections, compel Pakistan to formulate a foreign policy that is both agile and robust, aimed at safeguarding its national security and broader geostrategic interests (Jalalzai, 2004; Mehmood, 2000). The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, frequently termed the 'Cold War in the Middle East,' possesses deep historical roots and carries profound implications for regional stability (Mumtaz, 2016; Faheem et al., 2024; Altorai, 2012). This multifaceted conflict is driven by a complex interplay of political, economic, and ideological factors, with both nations vying for regional hegemony and the leadership of the

broader Muslim world (Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Faheem et al., 2024; Altorai, 2012). Pakistan, maintaining distinct yet significant bilateral relationships with both Riyadh and Tehran, finds itself in an acutely precarious position (Anwar, 2020). A critical examination reveals the profound interconnectedness of external rivalries and internal stability within Pakistan (Mumtaz, 2016). The provided evidence explicitly states that the Iran-Saudi rivalry, an external geopolitical conflict, has "drastic implications on Pakistan's internal affairs" and leads to "vast sectarianism" (Mumtaz, 2016).

This is not merely a tangential effect but a direct causal link, as Pakistan's demographic composition, with a significant Sunni majority and a substantial Shia minority, renders it particularly susceptible to external ideological influences (Mumtaz, 2016; Muzaffar et al., 2017). The resultant "heightened fear in citizens within the borders over their religious beliefs" (Mumtaz, 2016) directly questions Pakistan's national security. Any perceived overt alignment with either side risks not only diplomatic fallout but also the exacerbation of these internal sectarian tensions (Anwar, 2020). This transforms what might appear as an external relations challenge into a critical internal security imperative, making the balancing act far more complex and vital for national survival and unity (Mumtaz, 2016).

This article argues that Pakistan's foreign policy, characterized by a pragmatic "neutrality-cum-balancing" act, is a strategic imperative driven by geopolitical compulsions, economic dependencies, and internal sectarian vulnerabilities stemming from the protracted Iran-Saudi rivalry. While this approach has enabled Pakistan to maintain crucial bilateral ties and mediate regional tensions, it faces escalating challenges from external ideological influences and the complexities of global power dynamics, necessitating a continuous recalibration of its diplomatic and economic strategies to safeguard national interests and foster regional stability.

The Iran-Saudi rivalry is frequently labeled the 'Cold War in the Middle East' (Mumtaz, 2016; Faheem et al., 2024; Altorai, 2012). Historically, during the global Cold War (1945–1991), Pakistan was a part of the Western Bloc, aligning with the US through alliances like CENTO (Anwar, 2020; Sunawar & Coutto, 2015; Leffler, 1992). However, the current "Cold War" dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia presents a different challenge for Pakistan (Mumtaz, 2016; Faheem et al., 2024; Altorai, 2012). Instead of choosing one side in a global ideological struggle, Pakistan is compelled to maintain a delicate balance or neutrality between two regional powers, both of which are significant Muslim countries with deep historical, religious, and economic ties to Pakistan (Anwar, 2020). This signifies a shift from a clear-cut ideological alignment to a nuanced strategy of pragmatic survival and self-preservation. This implies that while Pakistan's historical experience with Cold War alliances might offer some lessons in strategic alignment, the current regional rivalry demands a more sophisticated and adaptive foreign policy (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). The conflict is not between distant superpowers but between powerful regional actors who exert direct religious and economic leverage over Pakistan (Mumtaz, 2016; Afzal, 2019; Khan, 2025). This necessitates a foreign policy that transcends simple alignment or non-alignment, requiring continuous calibration to manage competing interests and avoid internal fragmentation (Mumtaz, 2016; Anwar, 2020).

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In military literature, strategic depth traditionally refers to the geographical distances between a state's frontlines and its vital core areas, such as industrial centers, capital cities, and population heartlands (Kayani, 2010; Olson, 2014; Strategic Depth, 2015). This spatial buffer provides a country with time and flexibility to absorb an initial attack, reorganize its defenses, and launch counterattacks, as exemplified by Russia's historical experiences against Napoleonic and German invasions (Kayani, 2010; Olson, 2014; Strategic Depth, 2015). Conversely, states with limited strategic depth, like Israel, are inherently more vulnerable to rapid, preemptive strikes (Kayani, 2010; Strategic Depth, 2015). Beyond its purely military-geographical interpretation, strategic depth also encompasses a crucial political dimension (Strategic Depth, 2015). This involves the cultivation of treaties and alliances with friendly countries, leveraging factors such as trade, economic ties, cultural connections, and military cooperation (Strategic Depth, 2015). For instance, Israel's political strategic depth is often considered to lie in its strong alliance with the USA (Strategic Depth, 2015). In the context of Pakistan, the concept of strategic depth emerged in the 1980s, frequently associated with accusations of seeking to control Afghanistan to counter potential encirclement by India (Kayani, 2010; Olson, 2014). However, official Pakistani military perspectives, articulated by figures like General Ashfaq Kayani, emphasize a policy of fostering a "peaceful, friendly and stable" relationship with Afghanistan, rather than control, to ensure long-term security on its western border (Kayani, 2010). This highlights a shift towards a more political and cooperative interpretation of strategic depth (Strategic Depth, 2015).

A deeper understanding of strategic depth reveals its evolving nature beyond traditional military contexts (Strategic Depth, 2015; Strategic Depth, 2018). The initial definitions of strategic depth are military-centric, focusing on geographical space for defense (Kayani, 2010; Olson, 2014). However, the concept has expanded to include a "political dimension" involving alliances and economic ties (Strategic Depth, 2015), and even extends to modern domains like cyberspace, outer space, and the resilience of a nation's defense industrial base (Strategic Depth, 2018). This evolution signifies a broader, more holistic understanding of national resilience and influence in contemporary international relations (Strategic Depth, 2018). For Pakistan, its strategic depth is not solely about controlling Afghanistan as a military fallback (Kayani, 2010; Olson, 2014) but also encompasses its robust relationships with key allies like China (Strategic Depth, 2015) and its potential for stronger economic and cultural ties with Central Asian states (Strategic Depth, 2015). When analyzing Pakistan's foreign policy, strategic depth must therefore be understood as a multi-faceted concept that integrates military, political, economic, and even technological dimensions (Strategic Depth, 2015; Strategic Depth, 2018). Pakistan's pursuit of "congenial relationships with her neighbours" (Strategic Depth, 2015) can be reinterpreted as a form of political strategic depth, aiming to secure its western flank through diplomatic means rather than solely through military control, thereby reframing the often-criticized traditional military interpretation of its doctrine (Strategic Depth, 2015).

Understanding Strategic Denial and Deception in Foreign Policy

Denial and deception (D&D) are integral components of information operations employed by states and non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2018; Strategic Denial,

2019). While distinct, they are often intertwined in practice (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). Denial refers to the deliberate attempt to prevent accurate information from reaching an adversary, thereby blocking their ability to ascertain the truth (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). This can involve concealing true intentions, capabilities, or ongoing activities (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). Deception, conversely, involves actively providing misleading information to an adversary, aiming to cause them to believe something that is untrue (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). This can be achieved through "leaks," planted information, or the use of decoys to create an "alternative reality" for the target (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). D&D is considered "strategic" when it directly impacts national interests and major government policies, typically targeting the highest levels of an adversary's government or military command (Strategic Denial, 2017). Successful D&D campaigns necessitate strategic coherence, a clear overall plan for achieving objectives, and precise intelligence regarding the opponent's information collection and analytical processes, as well as their existing beliefs and expectations (Strategic Denial, 2017; Strategic Denial, 2019). In the broader context of deterrence theory, "denial" is a specific strategy aimed at frustrating an adversary's military power by denying them the benefits of an attack (Strategic Denial, 2023; Huth, 1988). This can involve capability elimination, operational paralysis, tactical degradation, or strategic effect reduction (Strategic Denial, 2023).

Pakistan's diplomatic "tightrope walk" (Mustafa et al., 2017) can be interpreted not merely as a reactive measure to avoid negative repercussions but as a proactive strategic denial operation. Strategic denial is defined as the act of blocking information or capability to frustrate an adversary's objectives (Strategic Denial, 2023). Pakistan's "neutrality-cum-balancing" policy involves meticulously managing perceptions and avoiding overt alignment with either Iran or Saudi Arabia (Neutrality, 2020). By consistently refusing to fully commit its military or political weight to either rival in their proxy conflicts (e.g., Yemen) (Ghazali, 2015; Ali & Ahmad, 2021), Pakistan is, in essence, strategically denying either rival the full benefit of its alignment against the other (Strategic Denial, 2017). This constitutes an active, albeit subtle, form of strategic denial (Strategic Denial, 2017). By denying a clear-cut advantage or full endorsement to either Iran or Saudi Arabia in their competition for influence over Pakistan, Islamabad preserves its own strategic autonomy and leverage (Strategic Denial, 2017). This active denial of full alignment is crucial for mitigating external pressures and safeguarding its internal stability (Strategic Denial, 2017; Mumtaz, 2016).

Theoretical Perspectives on State Neutrality and Balancing Acts

Neutrality, as a theoretical concept in international relations, denotes a condition where a state refrains from supporting or aiding either side in a conflict (Neutrality, 2020; Ennis, 1936). It legally and practically entails maintaining a position of impartiality and detachment towards all belligerents (Ennis, 1936). Historically, neutrality has served as a tool to constrain conflict and limit the expansion of war, allowing neutral states to regulate trade and commerce with belligerents (Ennis, 1936). Pakistan's foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is best understood through the lens of "neutrality-cum-balancing" (Neutrality, 2020). This approach signifies a dynamic oscillation and fusion between strict neutrality and a more active

balancing act, adapting to specific crises based on national interests and the perceived parity of its bilateral relations with the conflicting actors (Neutrality, 2020). The rationale behind this strategy is multifaceted: to preserve crucial bilateral ties, avoid exacerbating domestic sectarian tensions, and maximize economic benefits (Neutrality, 2020). Balancing, in this context, involves strategically appeasing one actor while simultaneously reassuring another, particularly if the latter holds significant strategic value (Neutrality, 2020).

Scholarly literature consistently characterizes Pakistan's foreign policy towards Iran and Saudi Arabia as a complex balancing act (Anwar, 2020). The rivalry itself is rooted in historical animosities, profound ideological differences (Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia versus Khomeinism in Iran), political competition for leadership of the Muslim world, and economic competition, particularly concerning oil and influence within OPEC (Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Faheem et al., 2024; Altoraifi, 2012; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; OEC, 2021; Economic Competition, 2020). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are noted for exploiting religious differences to influence populations and for sponsoring proxy wars across the region (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Moonis, 2008). Pakistan's specific diplomatic actions, such as its refusal to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, are frequently cited as prime examples of its commitment to a neutral stance (Ghazali, 2015; Ali & Ahmad, 2021). The broader academic consensus underscores Pakistan's adaptive and pragmatic foreign policy, deeply rooted in regional realpolitik (Anwar, 2020).

Roots of the Rivalry: Ideological, Political, and Economic Drivers

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is deeply entrenched in history, with both nations asserting their claims to leadership within the Muslim world and seeking regional dominance (Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Altoraifi, 2012). Prior to 1979, Iran and Saudi Arabia exhibited periods of "mutual understanding" and even cooperated as "guardians of the Gulf" under U.S. foreign policy (Altoraifi, 2012; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023). However, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, marked a pivotal turning point (Altoraifi, 2012; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Milani, 2018). The revolutionary ideology, which criticized the monarchical system of the House of Saud and called for the overthrow of secular governments in favor of Islamic republics, profoundly alarmed the Sunni-run Arab monarchies, including Saudi Arabia (Mumtaz, 2016; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Altoraifi, 2012).

This radical ideological shift fundamentally reshaped Iran's state ideology, transforming it into an anti-monarchy, anti-Western force (Milani, 2018). This directly challenged Saudi Arabia's legitimacy and its traditional regional influence, effectively initiating what scholars now term a "new cold war" (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023). At its core, the conflict is an ideological struggle between Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism, a conservative branch of Sunni Islam, and Iran's Khomeinism, a distinct interpretation of Shi'ite Islam (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023). This sectarian divide is not merely religious but is actively exploited by both countries as a tool for geopolitical influence and mobilization, often through the funding and support of proxies (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Moonis, 2008). The Iran-Saudi rivalry is not merely a static historical

animosity but a dynamic conflict continuously shaped by Iran's revolutionary ideology and Saudi Arabia's reactive containment strategy (Gause, 2023; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023). This fundamental ideological schism explains why Pakistan, with its significant Shia minority, became a "battleground" for proxy sectarian competition (Ayub, 2009; Muzaffar et al., 2017), as external powers sought to project their influence through internal divisions (Mumtaz, 2016). This implies that Pakistan's balancing act must continuously adapt to these external shocks, as they directly influence the intensity, nature, and geographical spread of the rivalry it seeks to navigate (Mustafa et al., 2017).

Politically, both states harbor aspirations for regional power and esteem, leading to a persistent struggle for influence in the Gulf region (Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017). Significant regional events, such as the fall of Saddam Hussein following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent Arab Uprisings in 2011, created power vacuums and destabilized existing orders (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia strategically exploited these opportunities to expand their respective spheres of influence, intensifying the competition and forcing new manifestations of conflict (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). Economically, competition over oil resources and influence within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) remains a significant dimension of their rivalry (Economic Competition, 2020; Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; OEC, 2021). While Iran's economy has been heavily constrained by international sanctions, impacting its trade and investment flows (Habibi, 2010; Nuruzzaman, 2020), Saudi Arabia is actively pursuing economic diversification through initiatives like Vision 2030, aiming to reduce its reliance on oil and attract foreign investment (Gause, 2023; Economic Competition, 2020).

The Iran-Saudi rivalry has manifested through various forms of hybrid warfare, including proxy wars, diplomatic maneuvering, cyber-attacks, and economic warfare (Mumtaz, 2016).

In **Iraq**, the 2003 U.S. invasion and the subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-led regime inadvertently created an opportunity for Iran to bolster Shia political factions (Mumtaz, 2016; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). This shift in power dynamics was perceived as a significant setback by Saudi Arabia, leading to an intensification of sectarian violence within Iraq (Mumtaz, 2016; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). The **Yemeni Civil War**, which escalated significantly from 2015, stands as a critical proxy conflict (Kugelman, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). Saudi Arabia leads a coalition supporting the internationally recognized government, while Iran provides varying degrees of support to the Houthi militias (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). The conflict has resulted in massive casualties and damage to infrastructure (Mumtaz, 2016). In the **Syrian Civil War**, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have actively manipulated religious identities to legitimize their interventions (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017). Saudi Arabia has supported various Sunni opposition groups, aligning its actions with its strategic objective of countering Iran's regional expansion by positioning itself as the champion of

Sunni interests (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017). Conversely, Iran has backed Shia factions, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, positioning itself as the defender of Shia communities and aiming to establish a "Shia Crescent" of influence across the region (Anwar, 2020; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023).

The rivalry also plays out in other regional disputes, including those in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Qatar, where both powers provide support to opposing sides (Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017). A significant diplomatic rupture occurred in 2016 following Saudi Arabia's execution of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr (Banc, 2016). In retaliation, the Saudi embassy in Tehran was set ablaze, leading to a severe deterioration of diplomatic ties (Mumtaz, 2016). More recently, China has played an expanding role as an economic mediator, leading to a significant agreement in March 2023 to restore diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, signaling a potential new stage in regional dynamics (Kugelman, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015).

Pakistan's Bilateral Relations: Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran holds the distinction of being the first country to recognize Pakistan's independence on August 14, 1947 (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). This early recognition laid the groundwork for a relationship rooted in shared history, culture, and linguistic ties, visible in modern-day Pakistan through classic Persian poetry on contemporary buildings (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). The two nations quickly developed a strong relationship, formalizing their bond with a treaty of friendship signed in May 1950 (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). During the Cold War era (1945–1991), Pakistan and Iran were close allies, both part of the Western Bloc and founding members of the anti-communist CENTO alliance (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Foreign Relations of Pakistan, 2020; Milani, 2018). This period saw significant cooperation, with Iran providing aid to Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani Wars of 1965 and 1971, including military hardware and financial assistance (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Notably, Pakistan also supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), despite considerable international pressure to side with Iraq, explicitly expressing its support to Iran (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020).

Despite these foundational ties and periods of close cooperation, the relationship has been marked by deep mistrust, particularly since 1979 (Christensen, 2011). Ideological differences stemming from the Iranian Revolution and divergent stances on the civil war in Afghanistan, where they backed opposing groups, complicated bilateral relations (Christensen, 2011; Milani, 2018). Persistent border tensions and mutual accusations of providing safe haven to separatist groups, such as Jaish al-Adl, further strain ties, as exemplified by Iran's missile strikes into Pakistan's Balochistan in January 2024 (Khan, 2025).

Historical Trajectory and Special Relationship with Saudi Arabia

Relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, established in 1947, have been historically close and friendly, frequently described by analysts as constituting a "special relationship" (Anwar et al., 2025; Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Pakistan has often been referred to as "Saudi Arabia's closest Muslim and

non-Arab ally" (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). In line with its pan-Islamic ideology, Pakistan has historically assumed the role of a guardian of Saudi Arabia against external or internal threats (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). From the 1960s to the 1980s, their bilateral engagement evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership characterized by a closely aligned foreign policy outlook and significant collaboration in the security and economic spheres (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). A key aspect of this cooperation was their critical role in supporting Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion throughout the 1980s (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Saudi Arabia provided crucial support to Pakistan, including extensive financial aid and oil, especially after Pakistan incurred international sanctions following its 1998 nuclear tests, providing US\$2 billion worth of oil and later converting it to a grant (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020).

While the relationship remains amicable, it has become more transactional over time, with each side gradually moving away from fully backing the other's stances vis-à-vis their regional rivals (India for Pakistan, Iran for Saudi Arabia) (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). This shift is indicative of a normalization of ties from an informal security alliance to a more pragmatic engagement (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020).

Economic and Security Dimensions of Relations with Iran

Economically, Iran, being rich in natural gas, is a vital potential energy partner for Pakistan, exemplified by the proposed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline (Anwar, 2020). Bilateral trade, though fluctuating and impacted by sanctions, holds significant potential for growth (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). For instance, in 2005, trade was US\$500 million, increasing to £1.4 billion in 2009 (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Iran is notably the second-largest market for Pakistan's Basmati rice (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Iran has also expressed interest in joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Pakistan Iran Economic Ties, 2025), aligning with China's 25-year strategic deal with Iran (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). The recent opening of border markets further indicates efforts to boost trade, with plans for a dozen more (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). In terms of security, both countries share a common interest in combating the drug trade along their border and addressing the insurgency in Balochistan (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Despite these shared security concerns, tensions have arisen, such as Iran's missile strikes into Pakistan's Balochistan in January 2024 (Khan, 2025).

Economic and Security Dimensions of Relations with Saudi Arabia

Economically, Saudi Arabia is Pakistan's largest source of petroleum and provides substantial financial aid, loans, and investments (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). This includes a \$3 billion aid and loan package in 2019 and a \$6 billion package in 2018, with \$1.5 billion deposited in Pakistan's central bank (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Remittances from the approximately two million Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia constitute a major source of foreign currency for Pakistan, amounting to \$5.8 billion annually (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Saudi Arabia also agreed in 2018 to establish an oil refinery at Gwadar, with a proposed capacity of 500,000 barrels per day (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). In terms of security, Pakistan maintains exceptionally close military ties with Saudi Arabia, providing extensive support, arms, and training for the Saudi armed forces (Pakistan-

Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Since the 1970s, Pakistani soldiers have been stationed in Saudi Arabia to protect the Kingdom, and Pakistan has provided training to Saudi soldiers and pilots (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). There is also speculation regarding Saudi funding of Pakistan's nuclear program and a potential desire to acquire nuclear weapons from Pakistan to counter perceived threats from regional arsenals (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020; Mumtaz, 2016).

A detailed examination of the economic and security dimensions reveals a significant asymmetry of leverage in Pakistan's bilateral relationships. While Pakistan shares deep historical, cultural, and religious ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020), Saudi Arabia's provision of substantial financial aid, petroleum, and its role as a major destination for Pakistani diaspora remittances (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020) grants it considerable economic influence over Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan's extensive military support and troop deployments to Saudi Arabia (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020) indicate a degree of security dependency. In contrast, while Iran offers potential energy sources and connectivity through CPEC (Anwar, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020), its economic influence is constrained by international sanctions (Habibi, 2010; Nuruzzaman, 2020). This practical reality suggests that despite Pakistan's stated desire for balance, its policy often tilts towards Saudi Arabia due to overriding economic imperatives (Anwar, 2020; Ali & Ahmad, 2021). This implies that Pakistan's "balancing act" is not a perfectly symmetrical one (Khan, 2025). Its acute economic vulnerabilities frequently compel it to prioritize Saudi interests, even when such actions risk irritating Iran (Ghazali, 2015; Ali & Ahmad, 2021; Mumtaz, 2016). This inherent tilt makes the balancing act inherently more challenging and susceptible to external pressures, particularly from Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the United States (Khan, 2025; Mustafa et al., 2017; Darabu, 2021). This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between economic fragility and foreign policy autonomy (Darabu, 2021; Mustafa et al., 2017).

The paradox of shared Islamic identity and geopolitical divergence is also evident (Anwar et al., 2025; Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are Islamic nations, and Pakistan itself was founded as an ideological Islamic state, with principles emphasizing the unity of the Islamic world and close ties with Muslim countries (Jalalzai, 2004; Yousaf & Tabassum, 2003). Yet, the evidence clearly demonstrates that despite this overarching shared Islamic identity, profound geopolitical, ideological (Sunni-Shia schism), and economic rivalries persist between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Gause, 2023; Elad-Altman, 2017; Faheem et al., 2024; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2017; Iran-Saudi Rivalry, 2023; OEC, 2021; Economic Competition, 2020). This paradox implies that Pakistan cannot simply rely on a pan-Islamic solidarity to navigate the rivalry; instead, it must contend with the *realpolitik* of competing national interests and hegemonic aspirations *within* the Muslim world (Mumtaz, 2016). The ideal of Islamic unity, while a foundational guiding principle for Pakistan's foreign policy, is constantly challenged and complicated by the divisive realities of the Iran-Saudi rivalry (Jalalzai, 2004; Yousaf & Tabassum, 2003). This forces Pakistan to adopt a pragmatic, rather than purely ideological, foreign policy approach, often leading to difficult compromises and internal contradictions, especially concerning the maintenance of domestic

sectarian harmony (Mumtaz, 2016; Muzaffar et al., 2017). The abstract ideal clashes with concrete geopolitical realities.

Pakistan's Strategic Calculus: Navigating the Rivalry

Pakistan's foreign policy towards the Iran-Saudi rivalry is best described as a strategy of "neutrality-cum-balancing" (Neutrality, 2020). This approach is a pragmatic response to its precarious geopolitical position (Neutrality, 2020). The primary rationale is to avoid overt alignment with either side, which would risk exacerbating internal sectarian tensions and incurring diplomatic fallout from the alienated party (Neutrality, 2020). This policy is not a rigid, consistently neutral stance but rather involves strategic flexibility, oscillating between strict neutrality and a more active balancing act depending on the specific crisis, Pakistan's national interests, and the perceived parity of its bilateral relations with the conflicting actors (Neutrality, 2020).

The overarching objective is to appease regional actors to maximize gains, such as economic aid and political support, while simultaneously exercising restraint and non-interventionism to uphold crucial ties with conflicting states (Neutrality, 2020). This delicate act is rooted in secondary pressures and regional realpolitik (Anwar, 2020). Pakistan's foreign policy has a historical trajectory of adapting its alignment strategies (Foreign Relations of Pakistan, 2020; Yousaf & Tabassum, 2003). Post-independence, it initially struggled to embrace non-alignment, eventually joining Western-led blocs like SEATO and CENTO out of defense and economic necessity (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015; Leffler, 1992). The traumatic loss of East Pakistan in 1971, partly due to perceived lack of US assistance, prompted a re-evaluation, leading Pakistan to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1979 (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015; Dawn, 1972). This historical context reveals that Pakistan's current "neutrality-cum-balancing" strategy (Neutrality, 2020) is not a novel invention but a sophisticated, pragmatic evolution of its non-alignment principle, specifically adapted to the complexities of regional rivalries (Neutrality, 2020). It represents an active strategic response to avoid being drawn into conflicts that could severely destabilize its internal fabric or compromise its vital economic lifelines (Neutrality, 2020). Pakistan's foreign policy is deeply rooted in a continuous quest for strategic autonomy and national survival (Dawn, 1972). Its shifting alignment strategies—from bloc membership to non-alignment, and now to active balancing—are dynamic adaptations aimed at maximizing national interests in a persistently volatile geopolitical environment (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015; Leffler, 1992; Dawn, 1972). The "neutrality-cum-balancing" approach is thus a deliberate and active foreign policy tool, rather than a passive stance, reflecting a deep understanding of its vulnerabilities and leverage points (Neutrality, 2020).

Pakistan's Mediation Efforts and Diplomatic Engagements

Pakistan has a notable history of playing an active role as a mediator in international and regional conflicts, including its significant contribution to Sino-US rapprochement (Mumtaz, 2016). This experience has extended to offering mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Recent examples include Prime Minister Imran Khan's visits to Iran and Saudi Arabia in October 2019, which reportedly led to Saudi Arabia expressing interest in improving relations with Iran (Pakistan Renews Mediation, 2020). The then Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi also undertook visits to Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US as part of de-escalation efforts (Pakistan Renews

Mediation, 2020). Pakistan has consistently articulated a policy of not allowing its soil to be used against any other state and explicitly stating its non-participation in any regional conflict (Pakistan Renews Mediation, 2020).

During the escalating Iran-Israel conflict, Pakistan affirmed its support for Iran's right to self-defense under the UN Charter but deliberately limited its response to rhetorical and symbolic support, consciously avoiding security assistance despite domestic pressure (Khan, 2025; Pakistan's Ability, 2025). This measured response highlights Pakistan's commitment to its balancing act even in high-stakes situations (Pakistan's Ability, 2025). Pakistan's ability to simultaneously maintain constructive ties with Iran and the US places it in a strategically important position to bridge divides and serve as a credible mediator (Pakistan's Ability, 2025).

Case Studies: Yemen Conflict and Qatar Diplomatic Freeze

The application of Pakistan's neutrality-cum-balancing policy can be best understood through specific case studies.

Yemen Conflict (2015)

When the civil war erupted in Yemen in 2015, Saudi Arabia, leading a coalition, formally requested Pakistan's military support (Ghazali, 2015; Ali & Ahmad, 2021). This presented a significant dilemma given Pakistan's historical military ties and economic dependence on Saudi Arabia (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). Pakistan's Parliament, after extensive debate, unanimously adopted a resolution to remain neutral in the Yemen conflict (Neutrality, 2020; Ali & Ahmad, 2021). The rationale cited included the potential economic and military costs, the risk of damaging relations with Iran, and the severe danger of exacerbating domestic sectarian tensions within Pakistan (Ghazali, 2015; Neutrality, 2020).

Despite the parliamentary resolution for neutrality, Pakistan's conduct shifted to a nuanced balancing act to appease Saudi demands while simultaneously preserving ties with Iran (Neutrality, 2020). This involved agreeing to send additional troops to Saudi Arabia for "border security" and military training, explicitly stating they would not participate in combat operations in Yemen (Ghazali, 2015; Neutrality, 2020). Pakistani leadership also provided strong diplomatic and moral support to the Saudi cause, emphasizing concerns for Saudi territorial integrity and recognizing the Hadi government as legitimate (Neutrality, 2020). Furthermore, Pakistan joined the Saudi-led "Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)," with a former Pakistani Chief of Army Staff leading it, but carefully clarified that the IMCTC was "not against any country or any sect" to mitigate Iranian concerns (Neutrality, 2020). This complex maneuvering led analysts to label Pakistan's position as "non-belligerent" rather than strictly "neutral" (Neutrality, 2020).

The Yemen crisis vividly illustrates that despite a parliamentary vote for neutrality, Pakistan's government still found avenues to appease Saudi Arabia through military training and strong diplomatic backing, while simultaneously reassuring Iran (Neutrality, 2020). This demonstrates that Pakistan's significant economic dependence on Saudi Arabia (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020; Neutrality, 2020) imposes practical limits on the extent of "pure" neutrality (Neutrality, 2020).

Qatar Diplomatic Freeze (2017)

In May 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a comprehensive blockade on Qatar, accusing it of sponsoring terrorism and

maintaining overly close ties with Iran (Mustafa et al., 2017). In this crisis, Pakistan adopted a consistent policy of non-intervention and strict neutrality (Mustafa et al., 2017; Neutrality, 2020). This decision was primarily driven by Pakistan's significant economic relations with Qatar, including a substantial USD 16 billion Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) deal and a USD 3 billion investment package (Neutrality, 2020). Both Pakistan's military and political leadership, including COAS Bajwa and Prime Minister Imran Khan, publicly emphasized maintaining strong bilateral ties with all Gulf countries "without taking sides" (Neutrality, 2020). Notably, Pakistan's trade with Qatar significantly increased after the blockade, demonstrating the tangible economic benefits derived from its neutral stance (Neutrality, 2020). The National Assembly also reaffirmed a neutral stance, advocating for mediation through dialogue to resolve the tensions (Neutrality, 2020).

Conversely, Pakistan's successful maintenance of ties with Qatar during its blockade (Neutrality, 2020) highlights that strong economic interests (e.g., LNG deals, investments) are critical drivers for upholding neutrality when direct pressure for alignment is less pronounced (Neutrality, 2020). This indicates that Pakistan's diplomatic flexibility is directly correlated with its economic resilience and the specific nature of its economic ties with the conflicting parties (Neutrality, 2020). The balancing act is a continuous, complex negotiation between economic necessity and diplomatic ideals (Neutrality, 2020). This often results in nuanced, sometimes seemingly contradictory, policy actions that ultimately prioritize national survival and economic stability over strict ideological alignment, showcasing a highly pragmatic approach to foreign relations (Neutrality, 2020).

Impact on Pakistan's Internal Stability: Sectarianism and Non-State Actors

The Iran-Saudi rivalry has had profound and often drastic implications for Pakistan's internal affairs, primarily due to its demographic composition of a Sunni majority and a significant Shia minority population (Mumtaz, 2016; Muzaffar et al., 2017). This internal demographic reality makes Pakistan particularly vulnerable to the external ideological and geopolitical competition between Tehran and Riyadh, leading to widespread sectarianism (Mumtaz, 2016). The rivalry has indirectly fueled increased sectarianism, radicalization, and discrimination within Pakistan (Mumtaz, 2016). This has resulted in heightened fear among citizens regarding their religious beliefs and has consistently questioned the state's capacity to ensure their rights and provide a peaceful coexistence environment (Mumtaz, 2016).

A distinct sectarian rift began to emerge in Pakistan in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ahmar, 2007; Mumtaz, 2016). This was a direct consequence of internal political changes within Pakistan, coupled with the ideological repercussions of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the orthodox, proselytizing approach of Saudi Arabia (Ahmar, 2007; Mumtaz, 2016). Saudi Arabia has strategically invested heavily in Pakistan to promote its Wahabi doctrine (Afzal, 2019; Mumtaz, 2016). Evidence of this influence is stark: the number of madrassas in Pakistan reportedly surged from 244 in the 1960s to over 24,000 by 2020 (Mumtaz, 2016). This significant increase clearly demonstrates Saudi Arabia's financial leverage and ideological penetration within Pakistan (Afzal, 2019; Mumtaz, 2016). This ideological conflict has not only accelerated extremism but also significantly enhanced sectarianism, creating fertile ground and

operational space for various non-state actors to strengthen their roots and pursue their agendas (Moonis, 2008; Ideological Roots, 2015).

Role of External Funding and Ideological Influence

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have actively funded and supported their respective ideological groups and proxies within Pakistan, directly contributing to the exacerbation of sectarian violence (Moonis, 2008; Ideological Roots, 2015). This external patronage transforms internal religious differences into geopolitical battlegrounds (Moonis, 2008; Ideological Roots, 2015). Historically, Saudi Arabia simultaneously played one side of the sectarian battle in Pakistan against Iranian interests while also providing extensive assistance to the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union (Mumtaz, 2016). This dual strategy later became a major source of tension between Islamabad and Tehran (Mumtaz, 2016). Iran, in turn, has been accused of supporting militant Shia elements in Pakistan in retaliation for perceived Saudi influence (Muzaffar et al., 2017; Ayub, 2009). The ideological and geostrategic squabbles between Iran and Saudi Arabia have effectively rendered Pakistan a "suitable heaven for non-state actors to promote their agenda for achievement of their core objectives of divide and rule" (Mumtaz, 2016). This highlights how external rivalries are internalized and exploited by various armed groups (Mumtaz, 2016).

Challenges to National Security and Coexistence

The sectarian conflict, fueled by external influences, has had devastating consequences for Pakistan's internal security, resulting in hundreds of deaths from suicide bombings, bomb explosions, assassinations, and other terrorist activities over several decades (Ahmar, 2007; Muzaffar et al., 2017). This ideological polarization has led to a deeply fractured society where "people of all sects despise one another, and the cleric's problems dictate that various groups be labelled infidels and condemned to death" (Mumtaz, 2016). This rhetoric directly undermines social cohesion and promotes violence (Mumtaz, 2016). Recent years have witnessed a dramatic spike in attacks and arrests targeting Pakistan's Shia minority (Muzaffar et al., 2017). Public accusations against Shia Muslims by hardline Sunni groups, and the trending of hashtags like "infidel, infidel, Shias are infidel" on social media, reflect a growing climate of intolerance (Muzaffar et al., 2017). Large anti-Shia marches in major cities like Karachi and Islamabad further underscore this alarming trend (Muzaffar et al., 2017). There are significant concerns among Shia Muslims that new laws might limit their religious liberties, such as the Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam bill enacted by the Punjab legislature, which was perceived as solely recognizing the Sunni interpretation of Islam (Muzaffar et al., 2017). Pakistan's delicate sectarian composition makes it inherently vulnerable to "blowback" from Iran's regional policies, particularly its support for Shia militias in other countries (Anwar, 2020).

Future Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Pakistan's ability to sustain its neutrality-cum-balancing act in the face of an evolving regional and global landscape remains a critical challenge (Mustafa et al., 2017). The recent China-mediated rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while a positive development, introduces new dynamics that Pakistan must navigate (Kugelman, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). This de-escalation could potentially provide Pakistan with more diplomatic space to engage with Iran, as the immediate pressure to choose sides might lessen (Khan, 2025). However, underlying ideological and geopolitical rivalries persist,

and the potential for renewed tensions or new proxy conflicts remains (Kugelman, 2023; Economic Competition, 2015). Pakistan must continue to institutionalize its neutrality, moving beyond ad-hoc responses to a more structured and predictable foreign policy framework (Anwar, 2020; Olson, 2014). This involves strengthening regional diplomacy and actively seeking opportunities for peacebuilding and conflict resolution within the Muslim world (Anwar, 2020; Olson, 2014). The growing involvement of global powers like China and the United States in the Persian Gulf further complicates Pakistan's strategic environment, necessitating a nuanced approach that maintains ties with all major actors without compromising its core national interests (Mustafa et al., 2017).

Diversifying Economic and Energy Partnerships

Pakistan's significant economic dependence on Saudi Arabia, particularly for petroleum and financial aid, creates an inherent tilt in its foreign policy (Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations, 2020). To enhance its strategic autonomy and reduce vulnerability to external pressures, Pakistan must actively diversify its economic and energy partnerships (Anwar, 2020; Olson, 2014). This includes fully realizing the potential of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and expanding trade relations with Iran, which could provide a crucial alternative energy source and market (Anwar, 2020; Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020). Furthermore, leveraging its strategic partnership with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offers avenues for economic diversification, industrialization, and technological cooperation that can reduce reliance on traditional benefactors (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Pakistan Iran Economic Ties, 2025).

Mitigating Internal Sectarian Vulnerabilities

The most pressing internal challenge for Pakistan remains the mitigation of sectarian tensions exacerbated by the Iran-Saudi rivalry (Mumtaz, 2016; Muzaffar et al., 2017). The proliferation of madrassas funded by external actors and the ongoing ideological competition contribute directly to internal radicalization and violence (Afzal, 2019; Mumtaz, 2016). Pakistan must implement robust internal policies to counter external ideological influences, promote inter-sectarian harmony, and strengthen state institutions to ensure the rights and peaceful coexistence of all its citizens (Mumtaz, 2016; Ahmar, 2007). This includes addressing the root causes of sectarian violence and preventing Pakistan from being used as a battleground for proxy conflicts (Mumtaz, 2016; Muzaffar et al., 2017).

Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Multilateralism

Pakistan's historical role as a mediator and its commitment to multilateralism, as demonstrated by its membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), provide a foundation for strengthening regional cooperation (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020; Sunawar & Coutto, 2015; Leffler, 1992). By actively engaging in regional forums and promoting dialogue, Pakistan can contribute to de-escalation and foster a more stable environment (Anwar, 2020; Olson, 2014). This proactive diplomatic role is essential not only for managing the Iran-Saudi rivalry but also for addressing broader regional security challenges, such as combating drug trafficking and cross-border insurgencies, which require cooperation with both Iran and Afghanistan (Iran-Pakistan Relations, 2020).

Conclusion

Pakistan's foreign policy in navigating the complex Iran-Saudi rivalry is a testament to its pragmatic and adaptive approach to international relations. Characterized by a "neutrality-cum-balancing" strategy, Pakistan endeavors to maintain crucial bilateral ties with both ideologically divergent yet regionally significant powers. This intricate dance is driven by a confluence of geopolitical imperatives, significant economic dependencies, and acute internal sectarian vulnerabilities. The historical evolution of the Iran-Saudi rivalry, particularly since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has profoundly shaped its regional manifestations, transforming it into a multifaceted competition for influence, often played out through proxy conflicts and ideological proselytization. Pakistan's deep historical, cultural, and religious ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, while foundational, are simultaneously complicated by the inherent asymmetry of economic leverage, particularly from Saudi Arabia.

This asymmetry often compels Pakistan to tilt its policies towards Riyadh, even as it strives to maintain balance with Tehran. The impact of this rivalry on Pakistan's internal stability is undeniable, manifesting in exacerbated sectarian tensions, radicalization, and the proliferation of non-state actors. External funding and ideological influence from both sides have turned parts of Pakistan into a battleground for proxy sectarian competition, posing significant challenges to national security and social cohesion. To sustain its delicate balancing act, Pakistan must continue to evolve its foreign policy. This involves institutionalizing neutrality, strategically diversifying its economic and energy partnerships to reduce external dependencies, and vigorously mitigating internal sectarian vulnerabilities through robust domestic policies. Furthermore, strengthening regional cooperation and actively pursuing multilateral diplomatic initiatives will be crucial for Pakistan to secure its national interests and contribute meaningfully to regional stability in a continuously shifting geopolitical landscape. Pakistan's strategic calculus is thus a dynamic and ongoing process of adaptation, seeking to maximize its autonomy and security amidst powerful, competing regional forces.

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